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A Skeptical Audience Vents Emotion

Predominately Black Crowd Cheers, Jeers, Groans at Hearing

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It felt more like a gospel meeting than a Senate hearing, as political activists, housewives and senior citizens vented plenty of raw emotion over allegations that CIA-backed Nicaraguan contra rebels financed their war with drug profits from the streets of Los Angeles.

Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), chairman of the committee that called yesterday's hearing, struggled to contain more than 300 people whose jeers and applause enlivened a normally staid hearing room in the Hart Office Building. The hearing had been repeatedly described on radio as a chance for the black community to voice outrage over the issue.

People took off from work. A few political candidates stop campaigning. There were looks of disgust on many faces. Mothers held babies in a long line to get a seat.

When the CIA's top internal investigator gave a response that the crowd considered inappropriate, he was jeered. The crowd was admonished. When the CIA official gave another inappropriate response, the crowd groaned. Specter threatened to clear the room. There was silence. When Sen. Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.) briefly

grilled the official, the crowd applauded.

The hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence was the latest chapter in a story that has gripped African Americans since articles in the San Jose Mercury News alleged in August that two Nicaraguan drug dealers had played a critical role in launching the nation's crack cocaine epidemic by flooding black neighborhoods in Los Angeles with cheap cocaine as part of an effort to raise money for the rebel war in Nicaragua.

It didn't matter to the crowd that CIA inspector general Fredrick P. Hitz told the panel that a brief 1988 study concluded "the agency neither participated in nor condoned drug trafficking by the contra forces." Most in the crowd decided not to believe him a long time ago.

"I have always believed that government has had an idea about who was bringing drugs into this country, they had to know," said Richard Ferguson, 55, a D.C. government worker who took off to attend the hearing with his wife. "I just came out to see what kind of spin they are trying to put on this."

Much of the crowd was drawn by announcers on WOL-AM radio, who urged listeners in the District and Baltimore to fill the hearing.

"This is the one thing in our community that everyone can relate too,

we all knew that we didn't have the planes to fly the drugs in," said WOL-AM host Lisa Mitchell, whose station reported live from the hearing. "We are being written off as conspiracy theorists and some kind of nuts, but our community has decided that we are not going to walk away from this issue."

Antonio Kimbrough, 37, a D.C. Fire Department paramedic who came on his lunch break, said: "I believe the allegations are true. I just wanted to see what the senators had to say."

Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), who has led calls for an investigation, left the hearing "confident" and encouraged that Specter would get to the bottom of the story. Comedian-activist Dick Gregory said the hearing "convince white folks" that the CIA was trafficking drugs.

Karen Gross, from Temple Hills, said, "A lot of people should be held accountable" at the CIA. Jackson Bey of Anacostia called the allegations, "direct warfare against the black race."

Kerrey said after the hearing that he doubted some of the allegations but that the hearing gave him a greater understanding about the anxiety in the black community over the issue. "At the very least you have a situation where the U.S. government and elected officials' priorities were painfully wrong," Kerrey said.

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BY ROBERT A. REEDER—THE WASHINGTON POST

An overflow crowd of more than 300 attended the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence hearing on the CIA.